

## Rules for the Discernment of Spirits – First Week – [313-324]

With commentary adjusted from Fr. Timothy Gallagher, OMV, and Ignacio Casanovas, SJ

*Abba Poemen said that Abba Ammonas said, “A person can spend his whole time carrying an axe without succeeding in cutting down the tree; while another, with experience of tree-felling brings the tree down with a few blows. He said that the axe is discernment.”*

—The Sayings of the Desert Fathers

These rules for discernment of spirits are worth their weight in gold. I am personally convinced that, if only for the Exercises and these rules, Ignatius could be named a doctor of the Church. He isn't one, but, no matter: these rules are *extremely valuable*. We should always have them in our toolbox of spiritual instruments so we can know what it is that is affecting our souls or the souls of others, and then apply the proper remedy for their ailments.

*Rules for [becoming aware – that's included in some translations] and understanding to some extent the different movements produced in the soul and for recognizing those that are good to admit them, and those that are bad, to reject them. These rules are more suited to the first week.*

“Ignatius, then, is assuming that our soul feels any number of different motions (the Spanish word is *mociones*) or movements, for instance, consolation, happiness or sadness, hope or despair, and although this is simply part of life in general, there is special need to pay attention to it during the Exercises, when God *should* be acting in this way (as we mentioned yesterday). These movements are of the spiritual order, and touch on our service of God and the health of our soul. At the same time, these movements can be very different, not only because they are different, one from another, but also because of the impression they produce on us, as well as the effects that follow from them.

The word *movements* seems to refer, at least for the most part, to the emotional and sensitive part of us. This doesn't mean that they are unrelated to our thoughts or imaginations, but, as Ignatius will point out, thoughts ‘come from them.’”

\*\* Note the most important part here is the need to *become aware* and then to *understand*. So many people go through life without stopping to consider what it is that's happening in their souls. They just kind of go forward (so they think), going this way and that way, blown about by every little whim, thinking that it's from God if they like it, from the devil if they don't. But things aren't quite that simple . . .

This discernment of spirits stems from Ignatius's own personal experience. While he was recovering in the family castle, the only books available to him were some romance novels, and lives of the saints. He noticed that when he read the romance novels, his imagination would be caught up, and he'd be happy. But, after a few hours, the happiness would go away, and he would be left dry and discontented. However, when he read the lives of the saints, it would make him happy and at peace, and even a while later, he would

be at peace. Often, though, other thoughts of world things would come to distract him in the course of his thoughts.

Anyways, we can see the three steps Ignatius outlines: **be aware, understand, and then accept or reject.**

**The first, and perhaps most important thing we need to determine, is whether a soul is going from bad to worse, or from bad to good or good to better. This sets the stage for everything else that we're going to talk about.**

(314) In the case of those who go from one mortal sin to another, the enemy is ordinarily accustomed to propose apparent pleasures. He fills their imagination with sensual delights and gratifications, the more readily to keep them in their vices and increase the number of their sins.

With such persons the good spirit [by this Ignatius means not only God, but also the good angels] uses a method which is the reverse of the above. Making use of the light of reason, he will rouse the sting of conscience and fill them with remorse.

\*\* If a soul is in mortal sin, the devil wants to keep it there. We can think of the example from the *Screwtape Letters* by C. S. Lewis. Screwtape tells his nephew: "I once had a patient, a sound atheist, who used to read in the British Museum. One day, as he sat reading, I saw a train of thought in his mind beginning to go the wrong way. The Enemy, of course, was at his elbow in a moment. Before I knew where I was I saw my twenty years' work beginning to totter. If I had lost my head and begun to attempt a defense by argument I should have been undone. But I was not such a fool. I struck instantly at the part of the man which I had best under my control and suggested that it was just about time he had some lunch. The Enemy presumably made the counter-suggestion (you know how one can never quite overhear What He says to them?) that this was more important than lunch. At least I think that must have been His line for when I said 'Quite. In fact much too important to tackle it the end of a morning', the patient brightened up considerably; and by the time I had added 'Much better come back after lunch and go into it with a fresh mind', he was already half way to the door. Once he was in the street the battle was won. I showed him a newsboy shouting the midday paper, and a No. 73 bus going past, and before he reached the bottom of the steps I had got into him an unalterable conviction that, whatever odd ideas might come into a man's head when he was shut up alone with his books, a healthy dose of 'real life' (by which he meant the bus and the newsboy) was enough to show him that all 'that sort of thing' just couldn't be true. He knew he'd had a narrow escape and in later years was fond of talking about 'that inarticulate sense for actuality which is our ultimate safeguard against the aberrations of mere logic'. He is now safe in Our Father's house."

Now then, we should be aware of this, because, when a person comes from a life of sin, we must convince them that the temptations they face, that call them back to that life,

are the devil's way of deceiving them and that, when they feel bad for their sins, that is God calling to them.

It is as Saint Teresa of Jesus remarks in the *Interior Castle*. She mentions that in the second mansion, "are found souls which have begun to practice prayer; they realize the importance of their not remaining in the first mansions, yet often lack determination to quit their present condition by avoiding occasions of sin, which is a very perilous state to be in. However, it is a great grace that they should sometimes make good their escape from the vipers and poisonous creatures around them and should understand the need of avoiding them. In some way these souls suffer a great deal more than those in the first mansions, although not in such danger, as they begin to understand their peril and there are great hopes of their entering farther into the castle. I say that they suffer a great deal more, for those in an earlier stage are like deaf-mutes and are not so distressed at being unable to speak, while the others, who can hear but cannot talk, find it much harder. At the same time, it is better not to be deaf, and a decided advantage to hear what is said to us."

In other words, these souls have started to hear the voice of God, have felt the sting of remorse, but are, perhaps, not quite ready to give up sin and go to God.

**[315]** In the case of those who go on earnestly striving to cleanse their souls from sin and who seek to rise in the service of God our Lord to greater perfection, the method pursued is the opposite of that mentioned in the first rule.

Then it is characteristic of the evil spirit to harass with anxiety, to afflict with sadness, to raise obstacles backed by fallacious reasonings that disturb the soul. Thus he seeks to prevent the soul from advancing.

"Note how different these two rules are! The souls to whom this rule applies are making an honest, continuous effort to purge their sins. What does the devil do in this case? The opposite of what he does in the first. The evil spirit tries to stir up all sorts of internal tribulations . . . and he isn't content just to attack the imagination and the sensible part of the person; he even wanted, if possible, to disturb the person's mind or reason.

Ignatius' point here is that our life is a warfare, and our soul is a battleground. We should not be surprised at these struggles, because there is a fight going on, and we are in the middle of it."

\*\* There is a lot contained here. Notice what Ignatius says the evil spirit does: "harass with anxiety" [some say 'gnawing anxiety' – the word has this sense of biting], "afflict with sadness," "raise obstacles," and "false reasonings."

In the Bible, Christ never tells us to be anxious or worried; in fact, the word for *anxious* is usually one that literally means *divided*.

In some letters to Teresa Rejadell, a holy woman who really loved God, Ignatius gives some more details about these methods of the devil.

Writing about **anxiety**, he told her:

“The enemy is leading you into error . . . but not in any way to make you fall into a sin that would separate you from God our Lord. He tries rather to *upset* you and to *interfere with* your service of God and *your peace of mind*.”

The devil just wants us to be miserable, to be less effective in God’s service. If he can get us to sin, he’ll be happy, but if he can’t get that, he just wants us to be unhappy, just as he is unhappy.

Regarding **sadness**, Ignatius writes Teresa:

“We find ourselves sad without knowing why. We cannot pray with devotion, nor contemplate, nor even speak or hear of the things of God with any interior taste or relish.”

Regarding **obstacles**, Ignatius writes:

“The enemy as a rule follows this course. He places obstacles and impediments in the way of those who love and begin to serve God our Lord, and this is the first weapon he uses in his efforts to wound them. He asks, for instance: ‘How can you continue a life of such great penance, deprived of all satisfaction from friends, relative, possession? How can you lead so lonely a life, with no rest, when you can save your soul in other ways and without such dangers?’ He tries to bring us to understand that we must lead a life that is longer than it will actually be, by reason of the trials he places before us and which no one ever underwent.”

Such as Ignatius’ own experience; before his profession of perpetual vows, the devil tempted him with thoughts such as the example he cites: “Will you be able to do this . . . *really* . . . for every day for the rest of your life?” Ignatius was worried, but then replied, “Can you promise me even a day more of life?”

Fr. Lalemont, the spiritual director of a number of the North American martyrs, says, clearly and unequivocally, that any thought or concern regarding the future comes from the devil. It is that simple: concerns about the future come from the evil one.

Finally, for false reasonings, we know that we have our reason, our intellect, as a gift from God. However, sometimes the devil tries to harass with it, sowing the seeds of false reasons. For instance, if we experience peace and calm, he’ll try to make us second-guess ourselves and our thoughts.

*It is characteristic of the good spirit, however, to give courage and strength, consolations, tears, inspirations, and peace. This He does by making all easy, by removing all obstacles so that the soul goes forward in doing good.*

\*\* Maybe the difficult word there is *consolations*, since it has a very specific meaning. That’s why Ignatius, in the next point, goes on to explain what it means.

(316) **Spiritual Consolation.** I call it consolation when an interior movement is aroused in the soul, by which it is *inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord*, and as a consequence, *can love no creature on the face of the earth for its own sake*, but only in the Creator of them all. It is likewise consolation when one *sheds tears that move to the love of God*, whether it be because of sorrow for sins, or because of the sufferings of Christ our Lord, or for any other reason that is immediately directed to the praise and service of God. Finally, I call consolation every increase of *faith, hope, and love, and all interior joy that invites and attracts to what is heavenly and to the salvation of one's soul by filling it with peace and quiet in its Creator and Lord*.

\*\* Note that Ignatius is talking about spiritual consolation, and not just any consolation whatsoever. If I eat a huge bowl of ice cream, I might feel consoled (or nasty), but I'd be hard pressed to call that a *spiritual* consolation. By spiritual, we mean that it has an impact on my life of faith and my relationship with God. Ditto with spiritual desolation.

Sometimes the natural consolation can lead to a spiritual one. There is a story of St. Therese of Lisieux who, upon looking at a hen protecting its chicks, began to cry. Her sister was there, and said, "You're crying!" and Therese went off to her cell. Later she explained to her sister that, when she began thinking about the hen and her chicks, that that was exactly what God had done for her for so many years: hidden her under the shadow of his wings.

Furthermore, note the supernatural characteristics of this consolation: see the words in italics. This isn't simply a happy feelings; it's something much more profound. Father Casanovas says that "spiritual consolation is *substantially a sensible increase in the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity*, and particularly of charity, which is the queen of all the virtues and has the greatest consoling force of them all. The other motions that accompany this are merely accidental.

What happens is that the divine love, charity, becomes, as it were, sensible; it burns and extinguishes in us all the other loves for any creature."

(317) **Spiritual Desolation.** I call desolation what is entirely the opposite of what is described in the third rule, as darkness of soul, turmoil of spirit, inclination to what is low and earthly, restlessness rising from many disturbances and temptations which lead to want of faith, want of hope, want of love. The soul is wholly slothful, tepid, sad, and separated, as it were, from its Creator and Lord. For just as consolation is the opposite of desolation, so the thoughts that spring from consolation are the opposite of those that spring from desolation.

\*\* Again, notice the emphasis on the *spiritual* aspect here. It's not just an emotional sadness or feeling bad. It, just like spiritual consolation, has a direct bearing on our life of faith and our relationship with God.

- *Darkness of soul*: this is confusion characteristic of the evil spirit.

- *Turmoil*: we can think back to the anxiety of the evil spirit.

To give an example of just how bad this can be, we can consider a passage from *Story of a Soul*, by Saint Therese. You know, the Little Flower, Doctor of the Church. We'll see it again at the end, but listen to the description of the way she felt before her first vows: "On the eve of the great day, instead of being filled with the customary sweetness, my vocation suddenly seemed to me as unreal as a dream. The devil—for it was he—made me feel sure that I was wholly unsuited for life in the Carmel, and that I was deceiving my superiors by entering on a way to which I was not called. The darkness was so bewildering that I understood but one thing—I had no religious vocation, and must return to the world."

- *Inclination to what is low*: a lack of delight in doing spiritual things and turning to the things of God.

"The time of desolation is the time that the evil spirit generally picks in order to talk to us, and it is from this reason that Saint John Berchmans took the principle, 'whatever upsets a soul that is given to the spiritual life, has the devil as its author.'"

Note too that desolation is not equivalent to mortal sin. Just because I feel far from God does not mean that I've lost grace in my soul or that I'm a bad person.

**[318]** In time of desolation we should never make any change, but remain firm and constant in the resolution and decision which guided us the day before the desolation, or in the decision to which we adhered in the preceding consolation. *For just as in consolation the good spirit guides and counsels us, so in desolation the evil spirit guides and counsels. Following his counsels we can never find the way to a right decision.* [This line will be very important when we talk about the discernment of God's will by means of these experiences].

\*\* Now Ignatius has gone from the experience, that is, how I feel, to the thoughts that come from it, the consequences that follow.

Note, too, the categorical nature of the command: we *should never*. No exceptions. Do not pass go, do not collect two hundred dollars.

Being in desolation is, sort of, like being drunk or being sick. You don't see things aright: your vision and perception is all distorted. So, if you don't judge right, you don't want to change things.

There's a funny story about James Cardinal Hickey, the archbishop emeritus of DC who invited us to Washington. He was sick and in a room at Providence Hospital. As he was eating his meal, the Daughter of Charity who ran the hospital stopped in to see, and asked how he was doing, and how he liked the food. The cardinal replied, "Sister, I'm doing fine, and this food is great! It's the best food I've had in a long time!" She just looked at him, and he continued, "Sister, I think you must've flown in a French chef to cook it; it's fantastic!" To which the sister replied, "Your Eminence, now I know that you are very sick."

Let me repeat that: Being in desolation is, sort of, like being drunk or being sick. You don't see things aright: your vision and perception is all distorted. So, if you don't judge right, you don't want to change things.

Casanovas calls desolation "an experiential crisis of love." He adds that, "most of the time, consolation is the voice of God that should be followed, since the Lord never contradicts Himself. The evil spirit is the one who contradicts God and anything that comes from Him. This is why it would be the devil who is inspiring me in the time of desolation against the resolutions and determinations I made in the time of consolation. Ordinarily, then, desolation is the enemy's word, and these are the pieces of advice I should follow in order to get on the right path."

**[319]** Though in desolation we must never change our former resolutions, it will be very advantageous to intensify our activity against the desolation. We can insist more upon prayer, upon meditation, and on much examination of ourselves. We can make an effort in a suitable way to do some penance.

\*\* While we don't change our decisions in desolation, we can try to change the *situation* or *state* of desolation. Note that Ignatius gives three possible solutions: prayer and meditation, examination of self, and penance.

**[320]** When one is in desolation, he should be mindful that God has left him to his natural powers to resist the different agitations and temptations of the enemy in order to try him. He can resist with the help of God, which always remains, though he may not clearly perceive it. For though God has taken from him the abundance of fervor and overflowing love and the intensity of His favors, nevertheless, he has sufficient grace for eternal salvation.

\*\* Many, if not all, of the saints recall experiences like this, where they feel that God has abandoned them, and that they have not received any graces from Him, etc. Saint Paul of the Cross, for instance, 45 years of interior desolation, and St. M. Teresa of Calcutta, more than 50 years. Basically the response is to remain firm, and to know that this, too, shall pass.

This is, says Casanovas, the true doctrine regarding desolation. God takes away the sensible overflow of consolation, but man always has enough grace for salvation.

**[321]** When one is in desolation, he should strive to persevere in patience. This reacts against the vexations that have overtaken him. Let him consider, too, that consolation will soon return, and in the meantime, he must diligently use the means against desolation which have been given in the sixth rule.

**[322]** The *principal* reasons why we suffer from desolation are three [we will see that what Ignatius proposed as tools against desolation are very suited to this causes]:

The first is because we have been tepid and slothful or negligent in our exercises of piety, and so through our own fault spiritual consolation has been taken away from us.

In this case, then, the best solution is to renew our good resolutions and proposals, to fulfill them, and do what it is we need to do. And how, we might ask, are we to know if desolation is our fault? Because we *examined ourselves and have seen that this is the cause*.

The second reason is because God wishes to try us, to see how much we are worth, and how much we will advance in His service and praise when left without the generous reward of consolations and signal favors.

\*\* God wants to make sure that we don't become attached to the consolations. As Saint Bernard would ask, "What do you seek: the consolations of God, or the God of all consolations?" When we are in consolation, we must "fill up our humps" the knowledge of God's love for us, like a camel.

So, what do we do in this case? *We should pray and meditate, meaning to think and ponder the truths that we know, the general rules that God is generous and that we need to serve Him and not for a reward. Hence, prayer and meditation would help us.*

The third reason is because God wishes to give us a true knowledge and understanding of ourselves, so that we may have an intimate perception of the fact that it is not within our power to acquire and attain great devotion, intense love, tears, or any other spiritual consolation; but that all this is the gift and grace of God our Lord. God does not wish us to build on the property of another, to rise up in spirit in a certain pride and vainglory and attribute to ourselves the devotion and other effects of spiritual consolation.

\*\* Yes, otherwise, when I have consolations and all sorts of graces, I might start to think, "Wow, I'm the cat's pajamas!" when really you're more like the cat's litterbox. What would keep us humble? *Doing penance, which is last remedy Ignatius proposes, because penance forms us in humility.*

**[323]** When one enjoys consolation, let him consider how he will conduct himself during the time of ensuing desolation, and store up a supply of strength as defense against that day.

**[324]** He who enjoys consolation should take care to humble himself and lower himself as much as possible. Let him recall how little he is able to do in time of desolation, when he is left without such grace or consolation.

On the other hand, one who suffers desolation should remember that by making use of the sufficient grace offered him, he can do much to withstand all his enemies. Let him find his strength in his Creator and Lord.